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A Biographical Sketch of L. J. F. Jaeger.

BY B. A. STEPHENS.

[Read December 3d, 1888.]

THE pioneers of the Pacific Coast are rapidly passing away. Each one's life is a history of travel, adventure and pioneering. Each one was a witness of remarkable events, which compare favorably with any recorded in the world's history. With them perishes their knowledge, unless written. Many valuable accounts are thus disappearing. A few here and there are being saved. H. H. Bancroft, more than any other man, has gone systematically to work, and, by throwing an army of canvassers into the field, has saved a great many of these personal sketches. Many he does not get, and more are lost. There is plenty of room for all in this line of historical work in Southern California.

It was in this spirit that old "Don Diego," the pioneer ferryman of Yuma, was persuaded to have his photograph taken, and this biographical sketch made, and both deposited in the archives of the Historical Society of Southern California. "Don Diego," as he is affectionately known by the natives of Yuma, has lived since the year 1850 at the place of "historic hotness." He is of German descent. His full and true name is Louis John Frederick Jaeger. The German form is Jäger, a hunter. Cousins of his at San Bernardino * spell it Yager, which form of the word is a reminder of an old-fashioned gun. The nearest the Indians could come to pronouncing Jaeger was "Diego," so as "Don Diego" has he been known all up and down the length and breadth of the Pacific Coast for the past forty years. For twenty-seven years he pursued uninterruptedly the occupation of a ferryman at Yuma. Hundreds of thousands of people crossed and re-crossed the broad Colorado river upon his boats during those twenty-seven years. For all of them, high and low, rich or poor, Don Diego had a kind word. No poor man was ever refused a passage; no rich man was ever overcharged. Travelers, soldiers, statesmen, philosophers, historians, journalists, lawyers and poets found hospitality in his hacienda; and by none was he immortalized more than by J. Ross Browne.

Of all who came his way he kept a brief record; the number of persons in the party, number of wagons, animals, home, destination, etc. An idea may be gathered of the magnitude of this work when it is known

* George Yager died February 8, 1889. Hardin Yager, the latter's brother, died about a week before. For 26 years he was treasurer of San Bernardino county. Isaac Yager, a third cousin, still lives there.

that in 1850-1, his first year at Yuma, over forty thousand people crossed the Colorado river at that point, coming into California. In 1857 there was a large emigration from Southern California into Texas, and Don Diego reaped its benefits. The railroad came in 1877 and built a big bridge across the river, and, like Othello, his occupation was gone. Business of national importance had frequently called him to Washington, and his counsel was heeded on grave matters. Few heads contained more information than his on questions pertaining to Indians Mexicans, the frontier or the government domain. The doors of the White House were always open to him, and cabinet officers and congressmen were equally attentive. His form now is rounded and his locks are grizzled, but at the advanced age of sixty-four years his eyes are not dim nor are his natural forces abated. He is about 5 feet 10 inches high, and weighs about 150 pounds. His hair is slightly gray, and his full gray beard is trimmed short. Clear blue eyes look out on either side of an aquiline nose from under a high forehead which retreats slowly back to thin locks. Genial, warm hearted and communicative, he is a prince among pioneers for reminiscences. His home is now at Agua Mansa, a romantic Mexican village on the south side of Slover mountain, on the other side from the practical American town of Colton.

Don Diego was born October 8, 1824, in Greenwich township, seven miles east of the town of Hamburg, in Berks county, Pennsylvania. He is proud of his German lineage. His great-great-grandfather, and great grand grandfather, grandfather and father were all Lutheran preachers. His father was the Rev. Gottlieb F. I. Jaeger, and was born in Illingen, Wurtemberg, Germany, in 1797. In 1817, when he was 19 years old, he left the Fatherland, and coming across the Atlantic in a sailing vessel, settled in Berks. He married Miss Mary Audenreid, by whom he had eleven children: 1 Charles; 2, William (now of McDowell county, West Virginia); 3, Lewis John Frederick (now of Agua Mansa, and the subject of this sketch); 4, Thomas; 5, Katie; 6, Mrs. Louis Levan (of Hamburg, Pa.); 7, George; 8, Mrs. Amanda Berger (of Langhorne, Pa.); 9, John; 10, Samuel; 11, Mrs. Emma S. Sallade (of Tamoqua, Pa.).

At 16 years of age he was apprenticed to a machinist to learn the trade, and served till he was of age. He was working in the Baldwin machine shops, in Philadelphia when the California gold excitement broke out. He accepted an uncle's offer to fit him out for the gold mines, and spent Christmas, 1848, with his mother, whom he did not see again for twenty-nine years. He purchased clothing sufficient to wear a year, and sailed from Philadelphia February 22, 1849, on the ship *Mason*, Captain Mason, bound for San Francisco. The voyage was eventless enough for the 150 passengers. They stopped twenty-two days at Rio de Janeiro, where they found 12,000 Americans like themselves en route to California. They made a similar halt at Valparaiso, where there was an equal number of Americans. At the latter place forty-five American vessels arrived on one Sunday.

San Francisco was reached October 6, 1849, and Don Diego is, therefore,

a pioneer. He did not go to the mines, but remained in the lively town of Yerba Buena, as San Francisco was then called, and hauled sand to build a brick block, the Montgomery bank, and also did some carpenter work. He joined a company which was organized to operate a ferry at Yuma. The members of that company, as he now recollects them, were Captain George A. Johnson (now of San Diego), — Tough, William Blake (married at Santa Barbara, now dead), B. M. Hartshorne (now living at Highlands, Monmouth county, N. J.), Dr. — Minton (a nephew of ex-Senator Charles Minton), — Moses (a Jew), Captain — Ogden, — Henzelwood, Joseph Anderson (now living at Cucamonga), Captain — Ankrim, — Potter, and L. J. F. Iaeger. Besides the twelve members of the company there were seven employés. The company chartered a sailing vessel, which conveyed them, in June, 1850, from San Francisco to San Diego, where they purchased teams to convey them across the desert. They bought horses of Cave J. Coutts and Don Juan Bandini. Don Diego bought one good mule of Don Juan Warner, now living in West Los Angeles, for the price of \$75.

Their trip across the *jornada del muerte* (journey of death, as the Spaniards called long, waterless strips of desert) was fraught with danger. They nearly perished with thirst. They saved their lives by digging wells at points where water happened to be found. The company arrived at the junction of the Colorado and Gila rivers July 10, 1850, and immediately commenced the construction of a ferry-boat. They had no iron, and only such small tools as axes, wedges, augurs and what else they could afford to carry. The Indians were numerous and bothersome. They became so saucy that the company was compelled to divide, some standing guard while others worked, while even those who labored kept revolvers buckled to their waists ready when needed.

They chopped down the *algodones* (cottonwood trees), and sawed out by hand the necessary ship timbers. The ferry-boat was put and held together by wooden pins and pegs. The first boat built was a common scow 35 feet long and 12 feet wide, and was two feet deep. There was a six-foot flare at each end. It was completed August 10, 1850, which shows that no time was lost, and that all hands had worked hard. It was immediately put to use. With large sweeps it was rowed across the Colorado river. The swift current carried it down the stream nearly two miles, and when the men got ashore on the New Mexican (now Arizona) side, they towed the boat up the river to a point opposite the one from which they started. This starting point, where scow No. 1 was launched, was the mouth of the slough on the California side, in the thickly wooded bottom, about half a mile from the site of the old fort.

The ferry charges were remarkably moderate considering the importance of the place and its remoteness from civilization. A team was charged \$10; a single animal, as a horse or cow, 50 cents. San Diego, the nearest American town, was 150 miles to the west, beyond a desert where so many thousands afterwards perished. Southward was the unknown Sea of Cortéz

bordered with desert shores. Northward was a great American desert, lying between the Sierra Nevada and the Rocky mountains, whose general characteristic is an arid, sandy waste. The nearest settlement to the east were the Pima villages, just above the great bend of the Gila river, and distant a hundred and fifty miles. Tucson was the nearest town to the east, while Santa Fé was over 500 miles away as the crow flies. The whole country was inhabited by savage Indians.

The general line of California immigration then, by the Southern route, was southward along the Rio Grande from Santa Fé, thence westward through Guadalupe cañon to the town of Santa Cruz in the Mexican State of Sonora, thence to Tucson, where a few week's rest was usually taken. Then followed a ninety mile desert northward to the Pima villages on the Gila river, where plenty of wheat corn and pumpkins were always to be found. The Gila river was then followed to its junction with the Colorado, where Don Diego ushered them into California. The present line of the railroad was closely followed to the San Geronio pass. This was a piece of the route where the greatest physical dangers were met, which overcame so many. Between Santa Fé and Yuma the principal dangers were from the Apache Indians, but here it was a pitiless and often hopeless struggle against fate. From Yuma to San Geronio pass is considerably over 200 miles. This part of the desert includes the Cahuilla valley, the greater part of which is over 300 feet below sea-level, and lies between the San Bernardino and San Jacinto Mountains. The soil is a sandy, gravelly waste that grows little else than cactus. The heat from May till September often ranges as high as 140°f. Then there was no water-supply except at brackish wells. The fatal mirage, that ocular phenomenon peculiar to the desert, still continues to lead astray the traveler crazed by thirst. Then it turned aside whole trains, one of which was found when the railroad was a building.

“Ringed around in circle white,
Holding to each other tight
Bleaching skeletons lay there
With their empty sockets glare,
Vacant staring, westward turned
Still as when the eyeballs burned,
With that last despairing look
When life's quivering pulse forsook.
Not a ravening beast or bird
Fleshless limb or trunk had stirred;
Not a hungry wolf might dare
Thus to brave the desert's glare
In that waste of terror wide
Thus they lay as thus they died.

—Kercheval.

The Chino ranch was the next resting place before reaching Los Ange-

les. Isaac Williams of the Chino ranch, like Don Diego, kept a register * of all persons enjoying his hospitality. These registers and records are priceless beyond gold or silver. They contain the names of hundreds who came seeking gold in the placer fields and found fame in the press, pulpit, exchange, politics, college, and upon the battle field. It will be interesting to discover from these records a chapter in the early history of their lives.

The company soon built a second ferry-boat. This one was sixty feet long and twelve feet wide. While changes occurred in the ferry business, Don Diego continued in it till the arrival of the Southern Pacific in 1877. During those twenty-seven years he witnessed and participated in many remarkable historical events. He came into a howling wilderness; he ferried thousands of Argonauts into California; he saw General Heintzleman subdue the Yuma, Mojave and Cocopa Indians; he saw Fort Yuma built and and its historic graveyard filled; he saw Olive Oatman rescued from her long captivity among the Mojaves; he saw the Crabbe party marching to its fate; he saw the great Arizona mining boom; he saw the railroad come, and the Blythe colony rise and fall, all fertile themes for the industrious historian.

Don Diego was married, and a son and daughter are past their majority. And now in his old age he has chosen a home at Agua Mansa (gentle waters). There he purchased five acres a little over a year ago, and has settled down to quietly pass the remainder of his days under his own vine and fig-tree.

* Now in the possession of Richard Gird, Esq., of the Chino ranch.

